

US-AUSTRALIA
INDO-PACIFIC
DETERRENCE
DIALOGUE

Revisiting Deterrence in an Era of Strategic Competition

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Foreword

We face an ongoing challenge today, to better understand and communicate — within our defence organisations, across national security agencies and with our partners and allies — how deterrence needs to adapt to respond to more ambiguous challenges and thresholds.

The Track 1.5 US-Australia Indo-Pacific Deterrence Dialogue is a very useful part of that conversation.

New technologies and hybrid warfare techniques are rendering simple binary approaches to deterrence inadequate. They are creating new realities in which some countries can circumvent the rules-based order through power projection, including by extending their reach beyond traditional geographic notions of territory and sovereignty. Australia and its allies and partners need to learn to adapt to these circumstances as we shape more effective and responsive approaches to deterrence.

Being sure of our own strategic position and aims, and who we can rely on to share our values and interests, will be key to accurately identifying who, what, and how we should seek to deter. We must strive to understand the new methods used by potential adversaries, and deal with the resulting issues of attribution and accurately identifying threats.

This needs to be achieved through a more dynamic understanding of international law and the rules-based global order — including the implications of unprecedented threats to sovereignty and the rules of warfare, such as state-sanctioned cyber attacks on government institutions, the use of militia without uniforms or insignia, and the apparent erosion of the prohibition on chemical weapons. We must also recognise the role of extended conventional and nuclear deterrence in alliances and the assurances that append it.

I welcome the United States Studies Centre and Pacific Forum's initiative to establish the Track 1.5 US-Australia Indo-Pacific Deterrence Dialogue and the opportunities this provides to discuss these issues.



Angus J Campbell, AO, DSC

General

Chief of the Defence Force



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About

Deterring the use of armed force and other forms of coercion is central to the maintenance of order in the Indo-Pacific. Yet from the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, to space, cyberspace, and the rules-based order itself, deterrence is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of major power competition, new grey zone challenges, emerging military technologies, and a rapidly shifting regional balance of power.

The United States and Australia are determined to offset these trends by pursuing more integrated strategies for the Indo-Pacific. In recent months, the Trump administration has emphasised long-term strategic competition with China, placing renewed focus on technological dominance, geoeconomic statecraft, nuclear modernisation, and military readiness. In Australia, concerns over Chinese strategic policy, foreign interference, and the durability of American power and leadership have sharpened the focus on collective security and whole-of-government approaches to regional strategy.

To advance a robust bilateral policy debate about the key role of deterrence in Indo-Pacific strategy, the United States Studies Centre and Pacific Forum hosted a Track 1.5 US-Australia Indo-Pacific Deterrence Dialogue in Canberra in December 2018. Both institutions thank the Australian Department of Defence and the Carnegie Corporation of New York for their generous support of this initiative.

The following summary reflects the authors' accounts of the dialogue proceedings and does not necessarily reflect their personal views. Nothing in the following pages represents the opinion of the Australian Department of Defence or any other officials or institutions that took part in the dialogue.

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Executive Summary

1. The nature of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific demands a renewed approach to deterrence by the United States, Australia, and their allies and partners. Rather than posing a purely military challenge, the Chinese Communist Party's use of grey zone coercion, geoeconomic leverage, emerging technologies, and nuclear modernisation presents a multi-domain threat to regional order. While deterrence must be calibrated for different domains, it provides an important lens for developing strategies to resist, deny, or punish coercion in an integrated way.
2. There is no common framework for Americans and Australians to engage in focused thinking about deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. While both allies have core interests in dissuading Beijing from employing force and coercion, they do not possess the kind of formal understandings about collective commitments, capabilities, risk thresholds, and resolve that are central to operationalising deterrence in other alliances. It may be necessary to strengthen alliance coordination and planning mechanisms over time.
3. The United States and Australia have distinct perspectives on the scope of deterrence. Whereas Washington views deterrence in a global context involving multiple powers, for Canberra, it is regional and primarily about China. Australia cannot independently deter Chinese coercion; but it can complicate Beijing's risk calculus by supporting US deterrence efforts, building domestic and regional resilience, and fostering collective action in the Pacific and Southeast Asia.
4. There is a growing consensus that the United States and Australia need a more proactive strategy for deterring grey zone coercion. Given the asymmetry of interests at stake in many flashpoints, this may require threats of legitimate escalation to build credibility. Other elements of a new strategy should include clear red-lines, the resolve to accept risks, an integrated policy toolkit, a collective approach, and explicit threat narratives.

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5. As the US-China regional balance of power evolves in favour of Beijing, Washington will need to work more closely with its allies to sustain conventional deterrence. The most urgent priority is to bolster the war-fighting capacity of forward-deployed forces to deny China a *fait accompli* victory in its near abroad — a task that is complicated by Beijing's higher tolerance for risk in pursuing a regional sphere of influence. In time, the United States, Australia, and other close allies may need to consider aggregating military capabilities to preserve a favourable balance.
 6. The Indo-Pacific nuclear order is entering a period of geopolitical and technological flux that will likely lead to more intense nuclear competition among regional states. If counter-force targeting becomes a central part of this competition — which is expected as new technologies like hypersonics come online — joint facilities such as Pine Gap will become more important within the alliance.
 7. Retaining a competitive edge in new technologies is central to deterrence in a multi-domain competition. This is best achieved collectively. The United States, Australia and other close partners should continue to integrate and breakdown barriers between their technological and innovation industrial bases. Expanding the Defense Innovation Unit to likeminded partners such as Australia can help stretch limited resources and focus investments on technologies that directly address shared operational challenges.
 8. Although networking among US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific is an important development, optimising the network for deterrence remains a key challenge. Capable allies like Australia should focus on developing the military interoperability, shared resolve, and internal coordination required for credible deterrence. In working to build the capacity and resilience of smaller partners, it is vital to present a positive narrative and a wholistic vision for the region's economic, environmental, and security future.



Deterring Grey Zone Coercion

1. There is broad agreement between Americans and Australians that grey zone coercion by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) poses the most pressing challenge to regional order. Defined as the use of asymmetric tactics to achieve strategic goals without the overt use of military force, China's grey zone coercion involves the coordination of multiple tools, including political warfare, disinformation, co-option, subversion, and economic leverage. Non-kinetic military and paramilitary actions — such as the use of salami-slicing tactics and maritime militias — also form part of China's grey zone toolkit. However, this subset of activity is less easily distinguishable from physical coercion and, at least in some cases, occupies a higher rung on the escalation ladder. The aim of China's grey zone coercion is to make the Indo-Pacific region 'safe' for the CCP by gradually altering the status quo in line with its interests, expanding its sphere of influence, establishing new norms of behaviour, and ensuring regional states are divided internally and externally to prevent coordinated counter-strategies.
2. It is important not to conflate grey zone coercion with competition itself, though there are no universally agreed criteria for distinguishing the two activities. Arguably the most useful distinction turns on the concept of legitimacy. In this view, 'competition' is an acceptable form of state conduct; whereas 'grey zone coercion' refers to actions that are illegal, covert, or corrosive of international norms and order. This distinction, however, is not wholly satisfying. Some note that coercion of all kinds is the business of international relations; and that even liberal democracies like the United States and Australia have employed grey zone tactics — and must do so again to defeat Chinese strategies. Sharper analytical frameworks are required to define the grey zone policy challenge. Failure to distinguish between grey zone coercion and competition could dilute policy responses; and risks censuring all forms of Chinese competition, which is an unsustainable public narrative and may prove counter-productive.
3. A consensus has not been reached on whether deterrence or resilience offers the most appropriate framework for addressing Chinese grey zone coercion. While some grey zone activities can be deterred — including certain types of maritime coercion, political interference,

and cyber activity — other forms need to be managed, defended against, and, where possible, ‘made irrelevant’. This requires a persistent focus on building societal, institutional, and regional resilience; and an understanding that ‘damage limitation’ may be the only way to protect open and democratic societies.

4. Rather than viewing these policy frameworks as alternatives, deterrence and resilience should be understood as complementary. Resilience is a precondition for effective deterrence. Efforts to strengthen domestic resilience — such as foreign investment rules, political and economic transparency initiatives, public media education, and counter-foreign interference laws — create barriers to grey zone coercion. Insofar as these raise the cost, difficulty, and, in some cases, risk associated with grey zone activities, such measures contribute to deterrence by denial. Likewise, efforts to bolster regional resilience — like capacity building, economic support, development, governance assistance, and the creation of robust institutions — make the aims of grey zone coercion harder to achieve by building cohesion among nations. Resilient polities and unified regions are better equipped to undertake deterrence.
5. When it comes to pushing back on Chinese grey zone coercion, there is a growing consensus that the United States and Australia need to develop a more proactive strategy — independently, bilaterally and alongside other likeminded allies and partners. Its overall aim should be to complicate the CCP’s risk calculus by establishing real consequences for grey zone coercion. In addition to making certain grey zone activities more difficult to prosecute, this will require at least five elements: explicit red-lines; the resolve to take risks; an integrated policy toolkit; collective action; and clear threat narratives. At present, however, there is little agreement on how, whether, and under what conditions each of these elements can be realised in practice.
6. Setting explicit red-lines is a key precondition for any deterrence commitment but has mostly been avoided by American and Australian leaders with respect to Chinese grey zone tactics. Both governments appear hesitant to draw red-lines owing to a lack of clarity about what they want China not to do and indecision about what actions they would be willing to take in response. Reframing the grey zone challenge to identify the interests involved — including an open society, independent political process, and freedom from subversion — would help to define red-lines and galvanise support for their defence. Explaining how particular grey zone actions will be interpreted in advance — by declaring, for example, that ‘doing x will be viewed as an act of hostility’ — may be a useful way to increase uncertainty for Beijing about the costs and risks of crossing a red-line. This could be achieved without specifying exact consequences, which can be diplomatically difficult and limits policy flexibility. Importantly, the United States and Australia need to have these conversations about red-lines and consequences together to avoid expectation gaps during crises and to facilitate collective action.

Efforts to strengthen domestic resilience — such as foreign investment rules, political and economic transparency initiatives, public media education, and counter-foreign interference laws — create barriers to grey zone coercion and contribute to deterrence by denial.

7. The resolve to defend red-lines by accepting costs and risks is another component of deterrence that is largely missing in existing counter-grey zone strategies. As a rule, clear commitments backed by the capabilities — military or otherwise — and political will to defend them is the basis for credible deterrence. There is a growing consensus, however, that at least in some parts of the Indo-Pacific — particularly in the East and South China Seas, and over Taiwan — an ‘asymmetry of interests’ favours China and makes allied resolve less credible. To recalibrate these stakes, some argue the United States and its partners should consider ‘legitimate escalation’ with the aim of inverting China’s risk calculus by accepting higher costs and risks in pursuit of deterrence. This might include: pre-emptory action such as maritime blockades; the threat of kinetic military or offensive cyber punishment; rapid responses that exceed CCP expectations such as the prosecution of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) hackers and United Front agents; targeted self-strengthening initiatives to complicate key Chinese objectives such as Australia’s Pacific Pivot and bans on Huawei and ZTE; and horizontal escalation to exploit the CCP’s domestic vulnerabilities such as its political-economic fragility and need to control the flow of information to its citizens. While there is broad support for investing more resources into some of these less risky options, there is considerable disagreement over the circumstances under which it would be prudent or politically feasible to accept greater strategic and operational risk. Americans and Australians agree, however, that changing China’s risk calculus is urgent, and there are concerns that Beijing may underestimate the resolve of democracies to respond to an incident.

8. Deterrence efforts need to be integrated and coordinated into a coherent whole-of-nation strategy, particularly on the economic and political fronts where the CCP is currently outmanoeuvring the United States and Australia. This requires greater cooperation between government departments, business, state authorities, universities, the media, expatriate communities, and society more

broadly. The fundamental objective should be to thicken the domestic resilience and policy cohesion that is needed to complicate Chinese grey zone activity. There has recently been some progress in this area, such as the introduction of new foreign interference legislation, tighter national security controls on foreign investments, and efforts by intelligence officials to educate non-government actors about United Front tactics and cyber risks. But more is required to breakdown the sectoral silos and myopic conception of self-interests that permit the CCP to sow disinformation and division. This must begin with enhanced information-sharing, regulation, and political leadership; and should include steps such as more effective federal-state coordination on Chinese economic activity and declassification

of grey zone threats to broaden public awareness. An equally important objective is to broaden the toolkit available to Canberra and Washington to prevent and punish grey zone coercion. Although harnessing the non-government sector for strategic effect is complicated in liberal democracies, it is likely to be an increasingly necessary part of deterrence in the grey zone. This could involve sanction-like restrictions on research partnerships, foreign students, and sensitive technologies;

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and expanded geoeconomic efforts by Australia and the United States to incentivise private sector actors to counteract Beijing's 'debt trap diplomacy' by investing in sustainable infrastructure projects in the Pacific, Southeast Asia, and beyond.

9. Deterrence efforts also need to be externally coordinated among likeminded allies and partners to facilitate effective collective action. Just as domestic cohesion complicates the CCP's ability to carry out grey zone coercion, international cohesion can diffuse the costs of Chinese actions and multiply the impact of individual nations' deterrence strategies. Yet, while coordinated global pressure on Russia was high in the wake of Moscow's interference in the US election and the Skripal poisoning affair, collective action over Chinese grey zone coercion has been largely limited to joint statements. Stronger efforts should include, for example, a move by Five Eyes to deter China's economic coercion by declaring that the punitive use of economic levers against one would be interpreted as the coercion of all, leading to surplus Chinese business and capital being blocked by the rest. Likewise, encouraging key Indo-Pacific states to respond to maritime coercion in pre-determined ways as a bloc — such as collective sanctions or patrols — would increase the costs Beijing incurs for crossing red-lines, particularly as it seeks to keep the region divided. There is, however, little optimism among Americans and Australians that common thresholds for action — particularly when risk is involved — will be easy to develop in the abstract, reinforcing the need to conduct simulation exercises to practice policy responses in context.
10. Underscoring all the requirements above is the need for a clearer narrative explaining why Chinese grey zone coercion poses a fundamental challenge to regional order and liberal values. Deterrence commitments and the political resolve to defend them are inherently more credible in democracies when accompanied by threat narratives that enjoy broad public support. At present, however, there is a burgeoning gap in the way governments and the general public view the grey zone threat, with the latter being ill-informed about the extent of the problem and thus more susceptible to disinformation. Closing this gap requires the political will to label Chinese actions problematic in public policy debates. While the United States has moved in this direction, Australian leaders remain hesitant to call out Beijing's coercive conduct due, in part, to concerns about economic exposure, domestic lobby groups, and the desire for cordial ties with China. Presenting the grey zone challenge as a threat to core liberal values — such as electoral independence and freedom of speech — is likely to be a more politically sustainable narrative. As Australia's national debate about foreign interference demonstrated, clearly identifying a grey zone threat offers both a justification for action and avenue for building public support.



Strengthening Conventional Deterrence

1. The United States' recent record of conventional deterrence vis-à-vis China is mixed. Insofar as American conventional military power has been a factor in CCP decisions to avoid the overt use of force, deterrence has succeeded. This is true in general terms — including over Taiwan — and in the few cases where Washington has issued specific deterrence commitments — such as over land reclamation at Scarborough Shoal and in defence of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which the United States has guaranteed under Article 5 of the US-Japan security treaty. Yet, insofar as China has successfully challenged elements of the regional status quo through non-military means which the United States and its allies failed to anticipate or prevent — particularly in the East and South China Seas — conventional deterrence has fallen short. It is unclear if deterrence actually failed in these cases, or whether the United States and its allies were 'self-deterred' owing, for example, to escalation fears, concerns about preserving positive relations with China, or an assessment that the imbalance of interests at stake did not justify threats of force. It is clear, however, that Beijing was emboldened to carry out non-kinetic challenges due to improvements in its own conventional capabilities and the belief that these would dissuade military action by the United States and its allies. This must be regarded at some level as a failure of general deterrence.
2. An urgent prerequisite for strengthening conventional deterrence is to develop greater clarity within the alliance about what Chinese actions need to be deterred and under what conditions military threats should be issued in support of these efforts. There is now a broad consensus among Americans and Australians that deterring the use of force by the PLA is not sufficient to preserve the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Deterrence must extend to China's territorial expansion, political interference, and violations of agreed principles and laws, regardless of the means by which these actions are pursued. Yet, there is no agreement on whether the United States and its allies should seek to deter China's non-kinetic actions by lowering the threshold for using conventional military force in response. Although credible threats of escalation would, in theory, have a better chance of dissuading Beijing from undertaking salami-slicing and certain forms of hybrid warfare, opinions are sharply divided on whether Washington and Canberra should accept the strategic and political risks this entails.

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3. China appears to have an advantage over the United States and its close allies when it comes to the resolve to escalate from the grey zone to the conventional military level or to pursue a quick territorial gain through a *fait accompli* strategy. This is due to an asymmetry in interests, risk tolerance, and in-theatre capabilities. Beijing has core interests at stake in several flashpoints — including Taiwan and in the South and East China Seas — and has defined its security as dominance within the Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore, as the CCP’s domestic legitimacy hinges on its ability to stand-up to the United States and prevail in the event of a conflict, it has a powerful motive to accept high costs and risks. By contrast, Washington and Canberra — although not all Asian allies — have seemingly less tangible interests at stake in these regional flashpoints. While both would like to see US primacy sustained in the region, they currently have a low appetite for accepting costs and risks in pursuit of this goal — as demonstrated by the hesitant response to China’s militarisation of the South China Sea — and regard the PLA’s anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities as making allied escalation more dangerous. Even though the United States and its allies would probably prevail in an extended major war, Beijing might wager that they would not intervene in a limited conflict.
 4. Finding a way to deter China from pursuing a *fait accompli* is thus the most pressing conventional deterrence challenge for the United States and key allies like Australia and Japan. This is likely to be more credible through denial than punishment. As the 2018 US National Defense Strategy makes clear, denying a quick victory to a major power competitor such as China will require changes in regional force posture and plans, including: increased lethality of forward-based forces; increased capacity to survive, operate, and win inside and close to contested A2AD zones; and the ability to prevail until surge forces arrive. Distributed basing, new operational concepts, and an end to the forward-deployment of forces for allied assurance rather than warfighting will all be necessary. Crucially, the United States must improve its capacity to deter and fight the PLA at the outset of a crisis so that a ‘choice’ to intervene does not need to be made.
 5. There are significant challenges to overcome. Some argue that deterring a Chinese *fait accompli* is as much about mass as technological superiority. As US and allied forces are built around exquisite systems that are too expensive to sustain heavy losses, they will neither be credible nor appropriate for ‘high density, high demand’ combat. There are also questions about the credibility of a strategy that relies on the ability to move conventional forces quickly and securely across vast ocean distances during a major crisis. Addressing these problems calls for further thinking over how to rebuild conventional escalation dominance, how to posture forward-deployed and surge forces, and how to use new technologies to offset the requirements for mass. From the perspective of credibility, however, there may ultimately be no alternative for the United States and its allies than to convince China — and, more importantly, themselves — that they would be prepared to absorb significant losses in personnel and platforms to protect shared regional interests.

There is no agreement on whether the United States and its allies should seek to deter China’s non-kinetic actions by lowering the threshold for using conventional military force in response.

6. One of the central reasons why sustaining a credible conventional deterrence posture against China is so difficult is because China is a major power without a fixed sphere of influence. In contrast to the Soviet Union during the Cold War in Europe, China is still seeking to define the geographical extent of its international power by increasing its 'core interest' claims. It is therefore challenging to develop a focused approach to deterrence and assurance, particularly as China's balance of policy priorities — regime stability, territorial expansion, and a sphere of influence — are unclear. Furthermore, deterring a rising power from acquiring a sphere of influence is significantly harder than containing it after the fact. Yet, this is the aim of deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. Whereas Washington and its European allies recognised Moscow's control over the Eastern bloc, policymakers in the Indo-Pacific today are not prepared to cede Beijing a sphere of influence — either in the maritime domain or over disputed territories like Taiwan. As a result, allied strategies for conventional deterrence must contend with China's local strategic advantages, focused resources, and high motivation to fulfil core interests.

7. Alliance solidarity and collective warfighting effectiveness is critical for conventional deterrence under these circumstances. Indeed, as the United States' relative position in the regional balance of power continues to erode over time, US allies will need to assume a more central role in deterrence and, if necessary, conflict. Preparations for greater collective military action are slowly underway, including: high-end capability acquisitions, deeper military interoperability, efforts to

solidify mutually beneficial security partnerships, and adjustments to refocus training on major war scenarios. But more substantial coordination is required to develop the unity of purpose and resolve required for effective deterrence. Capable US allies — like Australia, Japan, and South Korea — should consider forward deployments or more frequent presence operations and exercises to strengthen and signal their collective warfighting potential to China. Some argue that allies and partners should also begin to build military capabilities in concert with each other, though this may meet opposition from

domestic constituents that prefer to retain independent force structures and, in some cases, deterrent options. A less controversial first step would be to reconcile Washington's five bilateral treaty alliances in the Indo-Pacific — all of which are in different stages of readiness — in order to clarify mutual expectations and develop a coherent approach to conventional deterrence as an alliance network.

8. Contributing to credible deterrence as part of an alliance in a major power context is something Australia has not attempted for decades. Whereas Japan and South Korea have specific defence roles and guidelines for coordinating deterrence responsibilities with US forces, the US-Australia alliance lacks such formalisation. Both nations thus need to work together to develop common understandings over what roles Australia might play in conventional deterrence vis-à-vis China. One option that would signal Canberra's resolve could be the forward-deployment of Australian forces to strategic locations ahead of a confrontation, such as an island or chokepoint in Southeast Asia or the Pacific. The aim of such presence would be to serve as a costly commitment and as

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a means of maintaining access in a contested environment so as to maximise options, ensure freedom of manoeuvre, and 'flip' the A2AD operational problem.

9. In developing plans for conventional deterrence, Washington and Canberra also need to arrive at a mutual understanding over how, if deterrence fails, each would prefer a regional war to unfold. The two allies may well have different preferences on this question. For instance, Canberra would likely want to confine a conflict to where it breaks out — such as Taiwan or the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands — given Australia's low capacity for escalation. Yet, geographically limiting hostilities might not strengthen deterrence in light of the PLA's comparative advantages in localised contingencies. Washington may therefore have a preference for horizontal or other forms of wider escalation, with implications for how Australia and the United States would need to coordinate. Exploring these kinds of strategic and operational questions in detail warrants further attention within the alliance.



The Evolving Nuclear Order and Extended Deterrence

1. The Indo-Pacific nuclear order has historically been relatively stable. Although the region has seen the emergence of new nuclear-armed states — India, Pakistan, and North Korea — these developments have taken place sporadically and the principal contenders, as a rule, have exercised voluntary self-restraint. Nuclear modernisation has also been modest with relatively low growth in the size of stockpiles. Today, however, this is changing fast. The Indo-Pacific is entering a period of geopolitical and technological development that will likely lead to stronger nuclear competition. A singular example of these new developments is the emergence in the region of the world's largest nuclear asymmetry — that between the United States and a nuclear North Korea armed with intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).
2. China has recently begun to move quickly on modernising its own nuclear systems, developing MIRV-equipped road mobile ICBMs and an undersea strike capability. The result may be an increase in the total size of China's nuclear stockpile. Similarly, ambitious modernisation and expansion efforts are underway in India and Pakistan; while the role of nuclear weapons in US defence strategy has shifted since Barack Obama's 2009 Prague speech, crystallising in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review's reinvigorated focus on nuclear modernisation. Looking ahead, it is unclear whether nuclear weapons will enter the foreground of regional strategic competition. What is apparent, however, is that current developments may create proliferation incentives, particularly in Southeast Asia, further complicating the Indo-Pacific nuclear order.
3. Worryingly, there are no formal arms control agreements in the Indo-Pacific. Unlike Europe, the region does not have a history of nuclear management or arms control negotiations; and it is difficult to envision agreements being developed in the current geopolitical climate, particularly as global arms control architecture is coming under increasing stress. America's withdrawal from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty is almost a *fait accompli* and the future of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) process between the United States and Russia may also be questioned. Accordingly, regional nuclear-armed states are likely to remain unconstrained when modernising their arsenals for the foreseeable future. This highlights the urgency of

developing a process to start managing the Indo-Pacific's evolving nuclear order. Transplanting US-Russia or NATO-style agreements is not viable. While encouraging greater transparency over nuclear arsenals, planned developments, and doctrines — a goal the United States has been pushing for in recent years — may be a more promising avenue, no regional nuclear-armed state has so far expressed interest.

4. Extended deterrence has also been underdeveloped in the Indo-Pacific. During the Cold War, the region was secondary to the European theatre where the risk of nuclear use was higher. As such, America's 'hubs-and-spokes' alliance system in Asia was intended more as a tether for restraining adventurism by allies than as framework for jointly strengthening deterrence and defence. This is one reason why, in contrast to NATO, the United States never concluded nuclear-sharing arrangements with its Asian allies. Over the past decade, however, a significant amount of work on nuclear deterrence has taken place between Washington and its Northeast Asian allies. Established in 2010, the US-Japan Extended Deterrence Dialogue and US-South Korea Deterrence Strategy Committee have both made progress in strengthening bilateral approaches to deterrence and defence.
5. There is still no consistent approach by Indo-Pacific allies and partners to thinking about nuclear deterrence. Many complain that Washington has not provided an over-arching narrative about its deterrence strategy for the region. In this regard, relying solely on the Nuclear Posture Review is not sufficient because it isolates the role of nuclear weapons from the broader deterrence framework. At the same time, individual allies and partners perceive the role of deterrence, defence, and escalation differently, particularly when it comes to the role they might play in any regional contingency. Australia's view of nuclear weapons may be closer to that held by France than other regional nations, insofar as it sees their role as political tools of deterrence rather than useful or practical in conflict.
6. If the next phase of the Indo-Pacific's nuclear order is a move towards strategies and capabilities devoted to nuclear counterforce, allies may be required to play substantial roles. These developments will become the focus of extremely difficult debates within alliances in the future. It is therefore critical to begin discussions now on the potential responsibilities that individual nations might have in nuclear deterrence and defence; and to consider how, or whether, these could be operationalised through coordination, cooperation, and planning. Significant progress can be made if the United States and its allies jointly exercise deterrence and defence, including through tabletop or simulation exercises. To avoid feeding competition or arms race dynamics, Washington and its allies should simultaneously send reassuring messages to their key competitors. Careful thought must also be given to how greater allied cooperation on nuclear deterrence could proceed in what would likely be a strained political environment with low levels of domestic support.

Worryingly, there are no formal arms control agreements in the Indo-Pacific and it is difficult to envision agreements being developed in the current geopolitical climate, particularly as global arms control architecture is coming under increasing stress.

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7. Canberra recognises that its geographic location far to the south of Eurasia means that there is less need for nuclear capabilities in ANZUS than in other US alliances in the region. Australia is a low-priority for attack by nuclear-armed adversaries and has no historical or territorial grievances that could lead to escalation or open conflict. But Australia is anxious about Washington's commitment to regional stability and sees US nuclear weapons as essential to preserving the existing order. As a contributor to extended deterrence through Pine Gap and other joint facilities, Canberra also accepts regional allies have a key role to play. Accordingly, Australians are simultaneously worried about the prospect of American retrenchment and concerned about the risks of entrapment that its responsibilities under ANZUS could trigger in a crisis.
 8. The United States and Australia do not possess a shared declaratory policy on how to handle escalation regarding nuclear weapons. The text of ANZUS is ambiguous on extended deterrence and allied responsibilities; and there has never been any official declaration from the executive branch in Washington to confirm the existence of a US nuclear umbrella above Australia — despite the fact that Australian defence policy operates under this assumption. This ambiguity is reinforced by the fact that the United States and Australia do not have a bilateral nuclear dialogue like those that exist with Japan and South Korea. Establishing an extended deterrence dialogue should be a priority as the Indo-Pacific nuclear order becomes more dynamic; and would offer Australia a larger degree of agency in managing this future.
 9. There has been little discussion on the role of assurance in the US-Australia alliance. It may be useful to consider how Australia's force posture and capabilities fit into US extended deterrence

Establishing an extended deterrence dialogue should be a priority as the Indo-Pacific nuclear order becomes more dynamic.

in the region; and how they might be used to facilitate assurance of American alliance commitments. Norway's 'Bunkers-for-Peace' project during the Cold War — which involved the construction of nominal infrastructure for nuclear burden-sharing as a form of assurance — and other European precedents may be worth consideration for their relevance to Australia today. Alternatively, enabling greater burden-sharing at the conventional level could provide assurances about participation in full-spectrum conflict short of nuclear burden-sharing. Some argue that the Australia-United

States Ministerial Consultation (AUSMIN) communiqués should also be a vehicle for better allied communication about the role of nuclear assurance in ANZUS. Collective moves towards missile defence, in conjunction with other US allies, can also help to minimise the risks of decoupling.

10. As the United States, Australia, and other allies seek to strengthen nuclear deterrence and assurance, they should be clear-eyed about the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons — colloquially known as the 'Ban Treaty' — and the associated campaign to abolish nuclear weapons. Adoption of the Ban Treaty by Australia would complicate, if not make it impossible, for Canberra to contribute to extended deterrence and fulfil its other ANZUS obligations. A public narrative is urgently needed to explain the role of nuclear weapons in regional stability to a sceptical public that has tired of the stalled non-proliferation movement. This should be backed by a concerted effort by Australia and the United States to reinvigorate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty process.



The Role of Emerging Technologies in Deterrence

1. The United States has identified a set of technologies and domains that are integral to maintaining its competitive edge. Expanding on the Third Offset Strategy, the 2018 National Defense Strategy set out a goal to achieve 'dominance' in nine technologies, though it remains unclear what has driven their selection. There is a growing tension between the technologies with which the United States seeks to compete — such as hypersonics, directed energy weapons, and autonomous systems — and their ability to overcome the operational and strategic challenges these are designed to address. Washington will only be able to gain dominance — if this is possible at all — by collaborating with technological-capable allies, like Australia, that are willing to cooperate.
2. As the fourth industrial revolution approaches, Western countries are still dealing with third industrial revolution problems using second industrial revolution administrative and governance structures. In other words, technology is outpacing the ability of the United States and its allies to evolve and adapt adequately. One of the biggest challenges for Washington and Canberra is thus to develop the administrative dexterity and processes to leverage new technologies for strategic objectives effectively. Examples of their inability to fulfil this requirement include: delays brought on by the lack of legislative reform in acquisition authorities and insufficient resources to achieve technological priorities.
3. Personnel and infrastructure are key to maintaining a competitive edge and employing new technological capabilities. Liberal democratic systems may have an advantage over authoritarian systems in retaining talent as they encourage greater flexibility and creativity and do not focus on pre-determined targets or restrict different viewpoints. Western governments need to think about a 'build-it-and-they-will-come' mentality when seeking to attract scientific and technologically-innovative personnel. It is also essential to better resource research and development and make careers in public and government innovation more appealing to leading intellects. Winning strategies must focus on human agency because this is where the competitive edge will be developed even during technological arms races.

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4. For emerging technologies to have a deterrent effect they must be demonstrated to potential adversaries and used to create uncertainty about one's own capabilities. At present, however, American and Australian forces are being self-deterred by a lack of confidence in new capabilities. For instance, concerns about the effectiveness of electronic weapons in compromising communications systems without detection have led war-fighters to privilege old technologies, missing the opportunity to bolster deterrence by surprising or confusing opponents. There are also delays in deploying new weapons systems due to persistent disruptions by China and Russia. Over time, the failure to use new systems can weaken deterrence by signalling that the United States and Australia lack trust in their own technology.
 5. Relatedly, the United States and Australia should seek new opportunities to increase joint exercises that telegraph technological superiority in specific operational contexts as a way of strengthening deterrence. The work of the Strategic Capabilities Office is a case in point, given its mandate to reconfigure existing capabilities for deterrence effect. Technological superiority may not be the correct framework in this regard. In fact, there may be more value in revealing a technological solution to an operational problem China sought to create than in demonstrating technological superiority per se. It should also be recalled that technological capabilities do not necessarily need to be successful to have a deterrent effect, provided they are perceived to work. The United States and Australia should reconsider when and where there is utility in preserving secrecy, and under what conditions this is outweighed by the deterrence advantages that flow from signalling new capabilities.
 6. It is necessary to explore the theories of victory that China and Russia have developed for multi-domain conflict. Indeed, as the United States and Australia do not properly understand these objectives, the alliance is disadvantaged in developing the means to deter them. This is particularly true of Russia's so-called 'Gerasimov Doctrine' which situates conflict on a continuous spectrum

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that includes information operations, conventional warfare, and nuclear warfare. The doctrine has underscored a shift in Russian strategy over the past two decades to an approach that embraces a broad spectrum of weapons, including existing and emerging technologies, political warfare, cultural tools, and other forms of power. Beijing has reportedly developed a similar approach — though with important differences on the role of nuclear weapons — which remains poorly understood within the alliance. Research is needed to understand China's theories of victory and to develop appropriate alliance responses and strategies of deterrence.



Advancing Deterrence Through the Alliance and Partner Network

1. Deeper security networking among American allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific has the potential to significantly bolster deterrence efforts vis-à-vis China. As the US-China regional balance of power evolves in Beijing's favour, the strategic geography, aggregate military capabilities, and collective actions of allies and partners will be increasingly important for maintaining stability. The US 'hub-and-spokes' alliance system is already being transformed into a more diverse web of security partnerships in which capable US allies — like Australia and Japan — are assuming a larger role in 'spoke-spoke' capacity-building and defence cooperation with likeminded nations. Minilateral security groupings such as the US-Australia-Japan and US-India-Japan trilaterals are also developing into vehicles for higher-end military interoperability and coordination across a wide range of regional security and geoeconomic issues. These nascent moves towards coalition-building must be expanded if Indo-Pacific nations are to successfully balance China's rising influence into the future.
2. Optimising regional alliances and partnerships for deterrence, however, remains a key challenge. Despite some recent progress between the United States and Japan, South Korea and Australia, Washington's bilateral alliances and the wider alliance and partner network have yet to develop the levels of military interoperability, shared resolve, and internal coordination required for credible deterrence. In other words, there is limited cohesion when it comes to collective balancing action. Allies and partners are progressing too slowly on conducting high-end military exercises within large multi-national groups; and have yet to collectively — or individually in many cases — develop concepts and planning for the kind of multi-domain warfare that is likely to characterise a future conflict with China. While all regard Beijing's actions with growing concern, allies and partners have somewhat different threat perceptions and interests when it comes to bilateral ties with China, making it difficult to form common thresholds for action or a willingness to accept risks. And despite the proliferation of security partnerships and minilateral groupings, there are no formal mechanisms in place for American allies and partners to develop and coordinate targeted deterrence strategies outside the US-South Korea and US-Japan

alliances. If collective balancing efforts are to add up to more than the sum of their parts, the alliance and partner network must be able to act coherently and decisively in pursuit of shared goals.

3. One way to advance this process is to encourage focused thinking about the practical requirements for operationalising deterrence across the network. This must begin by recognising that regional allies and partners have distinct but overlapping priorities which can only be reconciled through sensitivity, compromise, and mutual support. As each faces its own geostrategic predicament and has military capabilities tailored to national requirements, planning should consider how to allocate appropriate roles and responsibilities for specific deterrence tasks and contingencies. This will require analysis of the plausible strategic futures that likeminded nations want to prevent — such as the reunification of Taiwan by force or the establishment of PLA bases across the Pacific — with a view to determining what collective steps, posture, commitments, and risk thresholds will be needed to deter the CCP from these objectives. In contrast to Europe, as most allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific do not have strategic policy communities oriented towards multinational deterrence, developing this framework will take sustained effort through dialogues, public debate, and official exchanges. This process will also encounter varying degrees of domestic opposition to greater integration, alignment, and ‘choosing sides’ in the US-China competition.
4. The role of American allies and partners in advancing deterrence goals is not fixed but should evolve in accordance with strategic realities and the regional distribution of power over time. At present, the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Australia are responsible — albeit unequally — for most deterrence-related tasks; and, with India, are at the forefront of regional capacity-building and security-networking efforts. There is a general view among Australians and Americans that this group of militarily capable allies and partners should boost their commitment to high-end capability integration to strengthen deterrence vis-à-vis China in the short to medium term. Over the longer term, many argue this group will need to expand collective efforts to equip Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, and others with the hard and soft means to deter Chinese coercion in the 2030s and beyond. The provision of counter-A2AD capabilities should be a key priority in light of the PLA’s expected improvements in power-projection and the need for regional assistance in complicating its war plans in the Southeast Asian littoral. As many of these nations will be leading economies by the 2030s, there may be a closing window of opportunity for medium-sized countries like Australia to shape the direction of regional security partnerships before relative power changes undermine the value proposition. This reinforces the need to approach new security partnerships as long-term collaborative investments in regional stability.
5. It is vital that US allies present a positive narrative and a wholistic vision of regional order when engaging emerging partners, especially in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. For many of the region’s developing nations, economic cooperation, infrastructure assistance, environmental degradation, internal security and other direct challenges — like boundary and resource disputes — overshadow the hard power dynamics of US-China competition. Most see Beijing as a valuable partner as well as a concern. Over-securitising regional strategy or advancing unambiguous threat narratives

about China within the region therefore risks pushing prospective partners away. As resilience is the most important region-wide objective for strengthening grey-zone deterrence — with only a subset of partners likely to develop the military assets for contributing to conventional deterrence — a careful balance needs to be struck between the narratives required for developing strategic partners and fostering cohesion. This could be made easier by anchoring new security initiatives, insofar as possible, within multilateral frameworks like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and Boe Declaration — which are not only favoured by regional countries but would push Beijing to expend political and economic resources to pursue counter-strategies that expose its hostility to the region's preferred architecture.

6. While the United States, Japan, and Australia have made progress on implementing overlapping Indo-Pacific strategies with the aim of bolstering security, economic and governance structures, is it difficult to determine how successful these are from the perspective of deterrence per se. This requires understanding how China perceives allied efforts and whether these have changed its calculus about allies' collective willingness to accept costs and risks in defence of regional commitments. Australia's 'Pacific Pivot', for example, has clearly attracted Beijing's attention insofar as the pace and breadth of new commitments to Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Fiji and others is concerned. It is likely, however, that Beijing will respond by stepping-up its campaign to build political influence. It remains unclear what the deterrent value will be of specific actions, such as the provision of Australian and US support to the PNG military facility on Manus Island. Likewise, efforts by the Trump administration to advance capacity-building, maritime security, and geoeconomic objectives in the region are important for bolstering deterrence by denial through resilience. Yet, Washington's relatively limited investment of new resources and the backwards steps taken in the Thai and Filipino alliances leave mixed perceptions in China — and other parts of the region — about American deterrence commitments.
7. There is ultimately no substitute for strong US leadership when it comes to building the credibility and cohesion of the alliance and partner network. Although the Trump administration is likely to be an aberration, the president's reflexive hostility towards US allies and global commitments continues to fuel anxieties across the Indo-Pacific. In this context, Australia and Japan have a crucial role to play in both stepping up their independent commitments to regional partnerships and holding the door open for a return to American leadership in the future. But they cannot muster credibility in the deterrence value of the network by themselves. It is encouraging that US Indo-Pacific Command and other parts of the government are seeking to present a countervailing narrative about the importance of allies and deterrence in the region. This will need to be augmented by larger investments in integrated regional partnerships if it is to persuade allies and adversaries of the United States' ongoing commitment to bear costs and risks in defence of rules-based order.

It is vital that US allies present a positive narrative and a holistic vision of regional order when engaging emerging partners, especially in Southeast Asia and the Pacific.



Towards an Integrated Deterrence Strategy for the ANZUS Alliance

1. The United States and Australia should consider developing a shared Indo-Pacific strategy to manage the respective lines of effort, military capabilities and other resources that can be brought to bear by the alliance towards deterrence goals in the region. Australia cannot independently deter Chinese coercion, but it can complicate Beijing's risk calculus by supporting US deterrence efforts, building domestic and regional resilience, and fostering collective action in the Pacific and Southeast Asia. Canberra's participation alongside Washington in regional capacity building and security networking can also lend legitimacy and diplomatic cover to activities that might otherwise appear too aligned for some partners. This is critical for building cohesion among a growing network of allies and partners.
2. It is necessary to assess how and under what conditions deterrence works in specific domains or flashpoints of the Indo-Pacific, and to understand where and why it has failed in other areas. These lessons should be used by the United States and Australia to bolster future deterrence commitments and to galvanise the alliance into taking the tailored, pre-emptive, and cohesive action required for effective deterrence. Expectation gaps should also be uncovered by this process. Indeed, it is unlikely that Canberra and Washington have sufficiently aligned positions to respond quickly and cohesively to a security contingency over Taiwan, the South China Sea, or the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. To bolster deterrence credibility and avoid expectation gaps during a crisis, both countries' strategic policy communities need to identify the specific scenarios and conditions under which they would be willing to mobilise the alliance in support of deterrence commitments, particularly in low threshold or grey zone coercion.
3. Simulations should be incorporated into official and second-track alliance meetings to assist in this process. In contrast to the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances which have developed systematic approaches to analysing deterrence scenarios in a bilateral context, the US-Australia alliance has lagged behind on employing joint simulations to determine alliance cohesion and responses. This is partially due to the less direct strategic deterrence challenges faced

by Canberra. Nevertheless, in-depth simulations on specific scenarios incorporating US and Australian officials and non-government specialists are invaluable for strengthening the alliance's capacity to think about and prepare for grey zone, conventional, and multi-domain deterrence. Consideration should be given to developing a US-Australia Alliance Coordination Mechanism to better manage strategic consultations and contingency planning.

4. As the US-China regional balance of power becomes harder to sustain, Australia and other capable Indo-Pacific allies may need to think more about aggregating military capabilities. A precondition for steps towards greater interoperability and integration is to better understand allies' differing threat perceptions, capabilities, and thresholds for risk, and to develop strategic and operational concepts for assigning allied tasks in ways that balance national priorities with collective efforts to bolster deterrence. This requires further experimentation, planning, and exercising between the United States, Australia and other trusted partners, with a view to exploring the delegation of roles in a crisis and making force posture adjustments in accordance with their strategic geography. Consideration needs to be given to posturing US and allied forces to defeat China or deter a *fait accompli*, even if this restructuring reduces conventional deterrence and assurance in some locations nearer to China. For Australia, thinking about the possible requirements of capability aggregation could inform future force planning and investments in areas like subsurface warfare, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, space, air/sea lift, and missile defence. How to develop shared capability sets among independent allies and partners, and how to mobilise these for collective deterrence, requires consideration at AUSMIN and other forums.

5. An Indo-Pacific narrative for the US-Australia alliance should be developed alongside a joint regional strategy. This is crucial to ensuring that policymakers and officials have a common language for identifying the alliance's core focus, and to inform the public in both countries about the value of the bilateral relationship in an era of rising strategic competition. Although this is beginning to change, the alliance has too often been viewed sentimentally and framed through its historic 'century of mateship' lens without a sense of its forward purpose. It is important to be clear on how the alliance serves US and Australian interests and values in the Indo-Pacific if it is to be a credible part of deterrence. At the same time, it is equally important to be frank about the issues over which differences exist so that these cannot be exploited by United Front efforts to magnify domestic and bilateral divisions. Above all, both countries need to develop a more effective way of communicating the magnitude of the stakes for the alliance of sustaining a favourable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. It is only by persuading sceptical domestic audiences of the need to invest in defending a free and open regional order that the United States, Australia, and other likeminded nations can deter the erosion of this order through the exercise of power and coercion.

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